

I Was You and You Were Me, But I Didn't Know Very Much About That. All I Knew Was This.

I remember seeing you a few times. Once in the library, behind a stack of textbooks, once sitting at this café near our school; you were staring out the window. I heard people talk about you sometimes, too. They'd say different things, like they did with everyone. I never really paid attention if I'm being honest.

Another time... oh yeah, I remember this time, I ran into you in the hallway; like a full on face-down-scrolling-on-my-phone-slam right into you, and we made this split-second eye contact. That was pretty much it though. How was I ever going to understand?

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An unfamiliar sound startled me awake that morning. My eyes opened, and I felt the adolescent sunlight trickling into the room. I was sandwiched into a mass of pillows and a creamy blanket was melted around my body. I was comfortable, but in a foreign kind of way. It was the kind of comfort you feel when you wake up for the first time after spending the night at a friend's house, or at a hotel on vacation. You don't know where you are but you're okay with it for a moment – that moment between awake and asleep. Comfort is always unquestioned in that first moment, it's that second moment when reality sets in, regardless of what that reality is.

I stretched out my arms and knocked my hands on the wall behind me. Ow. I had never hit the wall before. My bed wasn't

even touching a wall. I curled my toes and allowed a stretch to creep through my whole body, through my feet and into my legs. I twisted my back, and cracked it. It didn't crack like it normally did. Then I just laid there, breathing. That's when I had your first memory.

He was a large guy, muscular, tan, great smile, at least from what I could remember. I liked him for a while. (You liked him for a while.) But he always seemed like the impossibly-too-cool type. It was the idea of him that got me (you) the most. He was the perfect building block for the imagination. He was just mysterious enough to be made into exactly what I (you) wanted him to be. We were at a party, and after a montage of us locking eyes throughout the night he asked me (you) to dance. I (you) didn't even think that people did that anymore. But there we were, in the middle of this trashed living room, dense with bodies and loud music and smoke, just dancing. Slowly at first, his hand on my (your) waist, my (your) hand resting on the back of his neck, swaying, swaying, swaying. After a while, he got me (you) a drink and I (you) drank it while he looked me (you) up and down. Then, he got me (you) another drink and I (you) drank it. Then, he got me (you) another drink, and I couldn't remember what happened to that one.

Then we were in a dimly lit hallway kissing – his hand moving down my (your) body like it was his possession. That's when I (you) tried pulling away. He was stronger, slamming me (you) against the wall, my (your) head hitting the frame of someone's (yours?) family picture. He held me (you) there and moved his lips down farther. My (your) body seized up and he held on to me (you) tighter. I (you) started to yell but he forced his hand around my (your) mouth and threw me (you) onto the bed in the next room. I don't remember how I even got from the hallway to the bedroom, I remember everything was spinning and I felt the creamy blanket and the pillows. I felt him force himself into me and I couldn't even scream, his hand in my mouth, the other holding me down, stifling any chance I had at fighting back. Any chance you had at fighting back. I felt hot tears streaming down my face. I was trembling. The

unfamiliar sound started again and I recognized it as a phone, your phone. It was sitting on the bedside table connected to a charger plugged into the wall. I reached for it, pulling out the plug and laid my head back on the pillow, this time on my side, my right cheek pressed up against the pillowcase, my knees tucked in. I tried to unlock your phone. I tried my passcode because I didn't know yours, but then I did because it was the year that you were born. I saw texts from your friends; I had never met these people in my life. The first message was from Michael. I knew from the way my finger hovered over the text that it was the guy from the memory with the drinks and the hand, and the - I felt tears swell again in your eyes. He had texted, "Hey."

I got up and walked into the bathroom. I knew it was the bathroom because I just did. I looked into the full size mirror attached to the door. You were slender, with dark, long, curly hair. I remember in middle school boys used to stick their gum in it. I didn't go to middle school with you. I felt the tug at the back of my head where your mom tried to comb it out. I splashed water on my face and that's when I noticed all of your scars on my wrists. I looked for more and found more. They were splayed haphazardly down both of my upper thighs. I felt the knife, and again I felt the tears. I squeezed my eyes shut and fell to the ground in fetal position. I felt crippled. I felt the shower mat underneath my head, and then I saw your parents fighting. Your dad running towards me and slapping me across the face, ending the night exactly where I was now, on the bathroom floor, shower mat underneath your head. Every place held a memory, every memory encapsulated a feeling, and I was feeling them all.

I walked down the staircase into the kitchen, where a woman who I felt was my mother but I knew was not was sitting at the table with a newspaper and a cup of black coffee. My mom didn't like her coffee black, one cream and two sugars always. She was unconventionally beautiful, like you, like me. She had the same long, dark, curly hair. She gave me a hug and it felt natural but it also felt like I was a stranger taking advantage of the love she was

obviously trying to show to me. She looked at me with a look in her eyes; it took me a moment to recognize it as pity.

“Good morning honey,” she said. For some reason, her saying that to me in her voice, so sweetly, made me resent her. This woman. My mom. Your mom.

I didn’t know why. It seemed like she was making me breakfast, which is a perfectly normal and pleasant thing for a mother to be doing. My mom did it everyday, too. I watched as she spread butter on a piece of toast, she was using her left hand, I guess she was left-handed. The diamond ring on her finger glinted as it caught the light from the window above the kitchen sink, and an image of the same ring glinting on the same left hand caressing the face of a man with no ring on his hand, a man who was not my father, your father, flashed into my mind. I had walked in on them, you had.

I (you) had heard the noises they had been making from upstairs, it was like she didn’t even care if I (you) heard. I (you) walked in and saw them and they didn’t even stop. In that same sweet voice she has said:

“Close the door, honey.”

I think I hated this woman. But I loved this woman. No—you loved her. Who was this woman?

I walked out the front door in a daze without saying a word to the woman in the kitchen. She seemed used to it.

I saw a beaten up truck in the driveway. I felt a tinge of fondness and ease when I looked at it so I knew that it must be your car. I rifled through the purse that I picked up off of the ground in your room until I found your keys and unlocked the driver’s side door.

It was a stick shift, and I didn’t know how to drive a stick shift, but you had learned in a parking lot late at night with a few

of your friends when you were 16, so I put the car in first gear and drove out of the neighborhood.

As I drove I allowed my mind and your mind to wander. I saw the ocean on one side of me and I smiled at the thought of my family spending long weekends by the seaside, we had watermelon seed-spitting contests and my older brother would always bury me in the sand.

I also saw the water. It was kissing my, no they were yours, feet and then pulling away back into the vastness, it was night, maybe a month before. I saw what you saw, I think, sitting on the sand alone. You were contemplating walking into the ocean, and just continuing. Walking farther and farther out until it was too deep. Just like your life, my life. You wanted it to end didn't you? I wanted it to end in that memory, I felt it. How did you escape this?



I hit the brakes, almost running through a red light. I felt this deep sense of helplessness draining my soul, or was it your soul? I had never felt this feeling and yet it was so familiar – it was like seeing a new sunset every day, you know you’ve never seen that specific one before but somehow you know what it’s going to be like. Feeling your feelings was like that, but darker.

How did you escape this feeling? You haven’t escaped it. Could I escape it?

School looked the same to you as it did to me. Big, brick, and obsolete. I parked in the back of the lot, far away from anyone I knew, or at least that I thought I knew. I grabbed your bag and locked the door of your old truck that you were fond of and I walked towards the entryway. Once I was in the building I instinctively took a right even though my first period was to the left. I went to the French classroom and took a seat in the middle row.

The teacher saw me take a seat and asked me how I was. I nodded and said, “Bien.”

I didn’t speak French but I guess maybe you did, unless you just knew how to say “fine” but how the hell was I supposed to know?

I breathed heavily and picked at the corners of my nails, which is apparently a nervous habit that one or maybe both of us had.

And the tips of my (your) fingers started to bleed and I wanted to go home. Not to your home but to my home. My home had a red door that I always liked but it was chipped on the edges from being slammed too many times; I used to hate that. My parents would always be in their room fighting, sometimes for hours, but the thought of my bedroom, covered in dirty clothes and crumpled magazines with no creamy blanket on the bed made me feel calm. It all seemed like a place that I had read about in a book

rather than a place that I had lived in my entire life. Because you hadn't lived there your entire life, I had. You lived in the home with the abusive father and the cheating mother, with the creamy blanket and the bathroom floor and I felt so sorry for you, I felt so sorry for me. I wanted to change your life but I also wanted to change mine. I wanted my whole life back without understanding yours. All of my problems, all of my hurt, I couldn't handle yours too.

But now I had yours and I thought mine were worse than everyone's, before I was you, but now I just wanted them back, mine back, just mine.

How was I so foolish to think I could ever see you? Like really see you. I wished for this I think. I wanted you, or at least something like you, someone else, besides me. But now I wanted just me and I wanted to hug you and tell you it was all going to be okay. But all that looked like was a girl in the middle of a school classroom, head down, face red from holding back enough tears for two, arms wrapped around herself, gripping her shoulders tightly.

I knew you hated feeling like this, I felt myself try to push all of the feelings back, hiding them away. But they were both mine and yours and you weren't strong enough to push them both, And I didn't know what to think or do because I didn't know how to be you, but I was, and I didn't think I even knew how to just be me anymore. Because I had seen you, I had felt what you felt, and I could never go back. I was you and you were me, but I didn't know very much about that. All I knew was this. I had to leave. I had to get out of this damn French class because this damn teacher didn't really care how I was or how you were. She didn't understand you or me and she would never care to because if she did she would be asking for this.

And I couldn't waste time trying to explain you to anyone because they would have to feel it all to know. I was feeling it all and I knew. I (you) got up before class even began and I (you) let the door slam behind me (you). I (you) sprinted down the hallway;

if I (you) stopped at the room at the end I (you) could look in the window and see you (me) in American History. Maybe, if you (me) had even made it out of your (my) bed this morning. How was I supposed to know what all you could handle? Well I guess I could. You (me) were probably in the classroom, unless you weren't. But I didn't care. I didn't care where I was, where you were. I didn't want to see me, I wanted to forget me; this was the whole point. I needed to understand, this was the only way to understand.

I walked out of the school and kept walking, your shoes on my feet, your shoes on your feet, my shoes on my feet. I passed the parking lot, the playground, seeing the swing set made me remember falling and hitting my head – I could feel the back of your head pulse. I was having trouble discerning which pains were yours and which ones were mine.

I walked faster in your shoes, my shoes. I walked away from the school, away from your house, and my house, and away from you as me. I was me and I was you and I was tired. I couldn't keep up with your feelings and mine, your memories and mine, your experiences and mine. It was too much. I remembered you (me) sitting at the edge of the water again. I felt every pound of your heartbeat, of my heartbeat, and I understood. I felt the same way.

And I was there, at the shore, walking further out into the water, thinking about you thinking about me, and I felt my tears coat your cheeks and for the first time I knew that I knew what it felt like to be you. And I couldn't handle it.

by Rachel Goldenberg